



Bill Moyers with LBJ in 1964. "We won the civil rights battles of the '60s," he says, but "lost the political war."

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Baugh, Jurgensen, Kilmer, Theismann, Williams. Call that roll and you realize that Redskins fans have been blessed with some of the finest quarterbacks in NFL history. Which is what makes life so tough for the likes of Mark Rypien and Stan Humphries

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Bill Moyers speaks his mind on Washington, television, patriotism and George Bush, a man he says "lacks the courage of his convictions because he lacks convictions"

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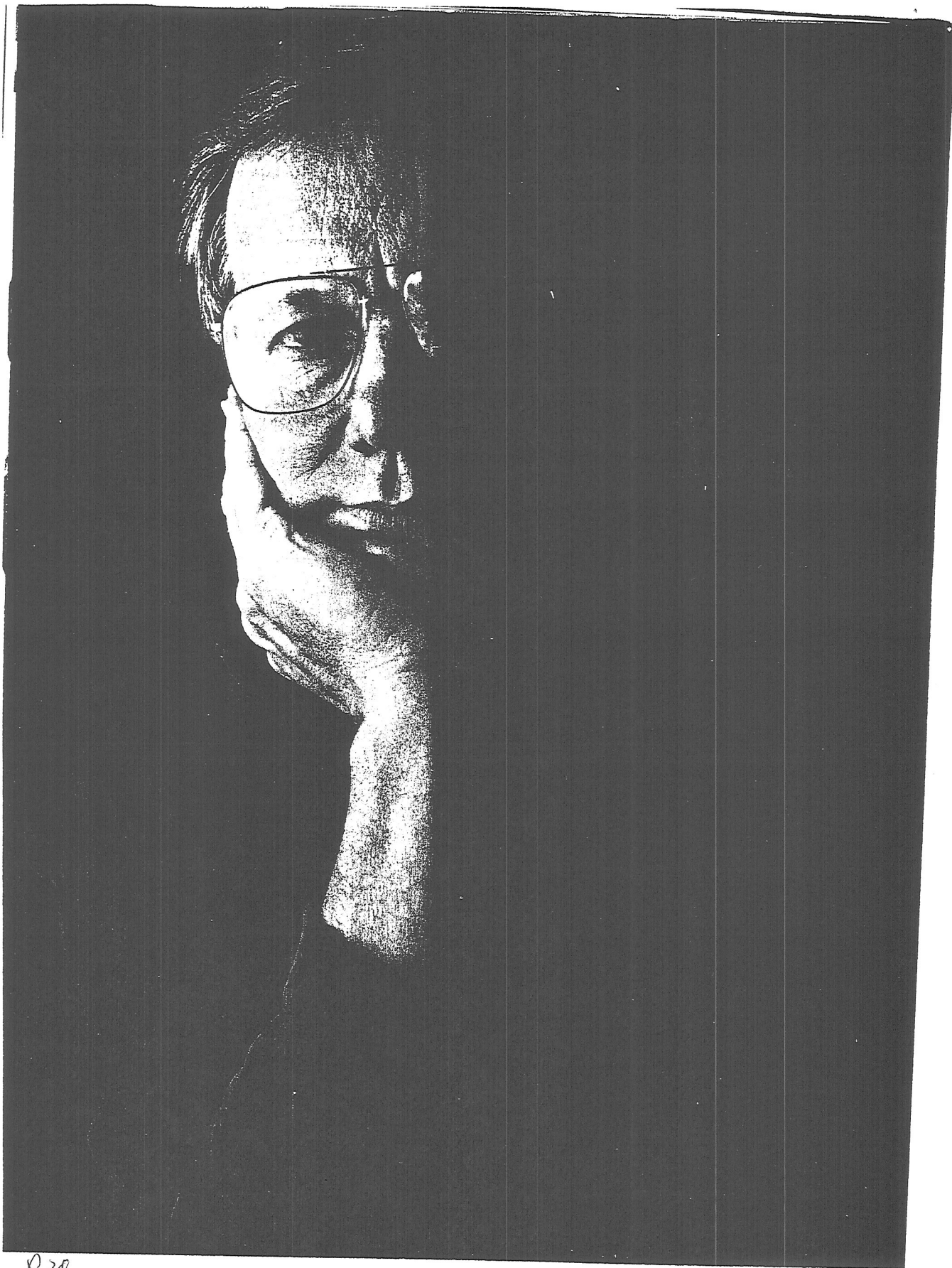
Inhuman nature **40**

Solution to last week's puzzle on page 26

Richard Cohen is on vacation. His "Critic at Large" column will resume September 8.

*On the cover:
Sammy Baugh, who was
the Redskins' quarterback
from 1937 through 1952.*

PHOTOGRAPH BY ASSOCIATED PRESS



It started as one of those low-level buzzes, the kind that only pundits and political junkies can hear. First, a couple of New York Times columnists floated it as a hypothetical. The Boston Globe ran it as a gossip item, as did the Hotline. A few weeks later, the New Republic—which thinks it's just an awful, awful idea—called it “not as implausible as you might think.”

Buzz, buzz. *What if Bill Moyers ran for president?*

Stupider notions have been entertained, of course (hello, Lee Iacocca and Peter Ueberroth; welcome home, Norman Schwarzkopf). Moyers, public television's reigning bigfoot, clearly does well on the tube—which, the current White House tenant notwithstanding, remains a key presidential qualification in the media age. He gets called things like “the conscience of America” a lot—a mixed blessing, but bound to increase one's stature. And unlike a lot of outsider candidates (he's never run for office, after all), he got plenty of political education as a top Lyndon Johnson aide.

MOYERS

ON WASHINGTON

One minor problem: Moyers says he doesn't want the job. And though he can be coy about it, it's probably best to take him at his word.

He's a provocative interview all the same, with passionate opinions on everything from the politics of image manipulation to Washington's incestuous, mercenary culture to the reason George Bush—a man he says possesses “no essential core”—always seems to be pointing his finger in blame. What follows is an edited version of several conversations with Moyers this summer. Where subjects were reexamined, Moyers's comments have been combined for clarity and to avoid redundancies.

After hearing Moyers on Washington, one question remains: How could anyone possibly think he'd want to live here?

**INTERVIEW BY
ERIC ALTERMAN**

Q

A number of pundits, political pros and voters have urged you recently to consider running for president.

Why do you think this is happening, and what does it say about the state of American political life today?

A: I think it says that there is nothing real out there. The debate has settled on so-called "issues" which politicians use to excoriate one another and divide the population. I deal with "problems," with what people think and feel. Second, I think there is an effort in what my colleagues and I do to get at the truth of the situation, and people appreciate that there is precious little truth in politics today. Third, I think people read into someone they see on television their own needs and expectations that may have little to do with who I really am. Walter Cronkite used to say, whenever people would ask him to run for office: "If they only knew what I really thought . . . they wouldn't be

with me past the front door."

Q: But *president*? You are, after all, primarily a television presence in people's lives—what critic Richard Schickel calls an "intimate stranger."

A: We come back to this word "real" again. Yes, I am an intimate stranger. But I talk to real people, and my colleagues and I work hard to try to keep the production inherent in television from blocking their authenticity. The viewers get a sense of eavesdropping on someone who is truly speaking his mind without regard to the consequences.

I have always admired people who could talk extemporaneously when I couldn't, and I compensated, I think, by learning to be a good extemporaneous listener. When I was puzzled about what to call my book of reportage 20 years ago, my wife, Judith, said, "Call it what you do. Call it *Listening to America*." We did, and it's been my work ever since.

Over the years, it's occurred to me that while television occasionally creates an unseen mass out of us, we remain essentially separated, and the last question I asked in my book remains valid to me: "Can these people I met escape their isolation if no one listens?" Maybe people—some people at least—want a president who can and will listen.

Q: Are you saying that for all the artifice and production technique that goes into one of your television programs, it is actually more "real" than a president's budget accord with Congress?

A: Well, a budget agreement, people know instinctively if not by hard lessons learned, represents a great deal of sound and fury and little else. The press seems to be astonished that people are yawning about the fact that last year's agreement is being ignored. People have become inured to that.

But even when people saw Ronald Reagan at Normandy, they were able to say, "That event is real." Had I stood at Normandy, I too would be moved. The problem is that the moments of reality are smothered by the steady stream of contrivances and manipulations that people now accept as the norm in politics.

Q: As the person who initially signed off on one of the most famous of all manipulations of political imagery, Lyndon Johnson's

notorious "daisy" commercial [which painted Barry Goldwater as a warmonger by showing a little girl plucking petals off a flower in the last seconds before a nuclear blast], what would you say are the most important changes that have taken place in our political debate since your days in the White House?

A: I regret the daisy commercial. And I don't want to sound like I'm trying to clean up the past. I oversimplified Barry Goldwater's record, and I carry that historical legacy with me. But in those days, such things as the daisy commercial were exceptions; today they are the rule. The contrived image is the dominant one in politics today. In those days, Lyndon Johnson's ability to rouse enormous crowds to enthusiasm about education, poverty and your children's future was intimately connected to a political campaign. Increasingly since the early '60s, politics has become mediated by these [television] images, and the rally, the party, the coalition have become marginal. We are now living in a wall-to-wall culture of contrived images designed for the purposes of manipulation. Our entire society is built upon a foundation of fiction.

Q: What are the consequences of this?

A: The consequences are that we seem to have lost the ability to think about our future, to consider our responsibilities to our children, to posterity. Leaders are afraid to come forth and say, "This is where we need to go and this is how we ought to get there." Just take the recent crime bill passed in the Senate. It is a fraud. It will compound the problems it is supposed to solve, but everybody feels better. The purpose of politics in the media age is to make people feel good, not to think critically about what we need to do to solve our problems. That is the chief difference between the 1960s and the 1990s.

Q: Robert Kennedy seemed to be able to say, "Follow me," and have some success with it. He once told a group of medical students that it would be they, as the most fortunate members of society, who would be expected to pay for the changes needed to build a fairer nation—and won them over anyway. Anyone who tried something like that today would be laughed out of the race. When did this kind of leadership become impossible?

A: It's impossible to isolate a moment. People were disarmed of their concern for the future by a sequence of events which caused us to lose faith in our ability to solve our problems. Vietnam began it. Watergate compounded it, and the two were inextricably interrelated. Both were a product of the culture of the secret government and the "national security" mentality.

Moreover, you can't overestimate the impact of the oil crisis and inflation of the '70s. People knew that inflation was robbing them of their future, and the treadmill began to speed up as everyone had to run faster to stay in place. This created a shift in ground that enabled Ronald Reagan and George Bush to get away with the biggest lie of all, which is that everything is for free, that we can build a better America without any pain.

Q: But conventional wisdom in

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Washington today is that it was you liberals who destroyed the fabric of middle-class values—hard work and deferred gratification—by creating a welfare state that punished initiative and rewarded laziness.

A: It's a cheap shot to lay these failures on the backs of the poor, as if our efforts to help them—failed as many of them were—created these problems. The poor had nothing to do with the creation of the secret government. The poor had nothing to do with the savings and loan crisis. The poor had nothing to do with OPEC . . .

Q: Nobody's blaming the poor. They're blaming you liberals.

A: Even if everything the right says about liberals is true, it would still address only a small segment of the collapse of America's self-discipline. It is a little bit like George Bush's answer to everything. The man's mind runs on one track. There are poor people out there? "Cut the capital gains." There are women with unwanted pregnancies? "Cut the capital gains." The waters are polluted? "Cut the capital gains." Hospital costs are soaring? "Cut the capital gains." It's hogwash. Reagan and Bush got away with it because we have come to prefer the comfortable lie to the uncomfortable truth. It goes back to the problem of media culture. We all live in a projection room. And those politicians who are able to massage our egos get away with it.

Q: Do you think the president is an unprincipled man?

A: I think George Bush is the most deeply unprincipled man in American politics today. He strikes me as possessing no essential core. There is no fundamental line from which he will not retreat. His public persona is informed by what the polls tell him people are feeling.

I have watched him for almost 30 years and have never known him to take a stand except for political expediency. One could say that about a lot of politicians on the way up, but the best ones, when they arrive, seize what opportunity they can to act on principle. I still remember when Jim Deakin of the St. Louis Post-Dispatch asked LBJ at a press conference in the East Room: "You were never very courageous about race when you were a politician in Texas. Why are you taking this on now?" And LBJ paused, swallowed, thought and said, in effect: Most of us don't get the chance to correct our mistakes. I have and I will. And he did. It's why, for all I know of his grasping and dark side, I admire some of the stands he took once he became president. I have been hoping for something like that from Bush, but it hasn't been forthcoming.

Q: In what sense, exactly, is the president failing the country?

A: America is polarizing so fast these days that a word from the top could slow if not arrest the process, but he won't do it. I have never seen him do anything courageous in office. He had to be a brave young man to do what he did in combat, so I know there is a core of courage in him somewhere. That he has refused to exercise it tells me he is merely calculating about everything he does. He follows out in front. It isn't just his opposition years ago to those measures that ended official segregation. It's been his continuing subtle—sometimes not so subtle—use of race to advance his cause.

He and his kind hated the right wing, yet he caters to it now. I followed his trail through the South in the 1984 election, and what I heard was George Wallace refined, making sure the good ol' boys knew he was one of them in keeping "other people" in their place. There's a mean spirit in the man that often acts the bully and usually toward those weaker than him.

Have you noticed how often he points? He's always pointing his finger in blame at someone else—at bad guys and evil forces he can blame. The economy declines, output falls, human services deteriorate, public facilities suffer, the poor multiply, our economic rivals are overtaking us: "It's all Congress's fault. Liberals are to blame." You'd think the Republicans haven't controlled the executive branch for 20 of the past 24 years.

'Washington has become such a mercenary culture that there is no real political culture left. The defining exchange is money, not ideas, not problem-solving. We live in a democracy of money and images.'

Things are important to Bush only for their exchange value—whether it's his position on abortion, which he once supported, or his position on voodoo economics, which he denounced and then practiced and practices today. The one time he truly led us—orchestrating the world community to support an alternative to war in standing down an aggressor, a moment people had dreamed of for centuries—he panicked and chose war. Then he panicked again and, with his prey on the run—Hitler in the bunker—he failed to finish the job.

The America I know is a foreign land to Bush. He prefers the tarmacs of the world to the realities of America. So he has no idea of how many wounded there are in America or of the desperate need for the politics of healing. Bush is no healer. He gives no quarter, offers no solace and transforms no pain. When you're up, he flatters. When you're down, he kicks. He lacks the courage of his convictions because he lacks convictions.

Q: Some people, particularly some liberals, might say that, given your own political history in the Johnson White House, you

are perhaps not the best person to be casting stones today. Morley Safer has accused you of sitting in on a 1965 meeting where Johnson threatened Frank Stanton, the president of CBS News, because of Safer's reports from Vietnam. He says Johnson told Stanton that unless CBS got rid of Safer and "cleaned up its act," the White House would "go public" with "the goods" that Bill Moyers had about Safer's "communist ties." Safer also alludes to some involvement on your part in disseminating FBI wiretaps of Martin Luther King and other civil rights leaders.

A: Now wait a minute. Morley Safer was in Vietnam at the time this meeting was supposed to have taken place, so he is already quite removed from the story. I don't remember being in any meeting with Frank Stanton when Morley Safer was discussed, and Stanton has said on the record that he doesn't remember it. So of the three people who were said to be there, two don't remember it and the third person, Lyndon Johnson, is dead.

Q: Are you saying you don't remember it, or are you saying it's not true?

A: It's not that I don't remember it. Johnson never did it. In meetings alone with Lyndon Johnson, he said plenty of people, especially reporters, were communists. He railed and railed, and then the next day he'd forget it. Particularly Safer and Peter Arnett. They were right about Vietnam, and he was wrong. That was part of Johnson's anguish.

Q: What about the accusations regarding Dr. King? Safer writes that your "part in Lyndon Johnson and J. Edgar Hoover's bugging of Martin Luther King's private life, the leaks to the press and diplomatic corps, the surveillance of civil rights groups at the 1964 Democratic convention, and [your] request for damaging information from Hoover on members of the Goldwater campaign suggest that [you were] not only a good soldier but a

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MOYERS

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gleeful retainer feeding the appetites of Lyndon Johnson." The historian David Garrow published a book in 1981 quoting internal FBI memos in which it appeared that one FBI agent—a man named Deke DeLoach—kept in constant contact with you and [Johnson aide] Walter Jenkins regarding the FBI's surveillance of King and its attempts to leak embarrassing information about the civil rights movement. DeLoach—who, in fairness, I should note is not considered by Garrow to be a terribly credible source—is nevertheless quoted as saying that "Jenkins and Moyers" asked him to show the file on alleged communist infiltration in King's movement to the attorney general. Is that true?

A: Look, Lyndon Johnson never thought that King was a communist. Johnson knew on the basis of information provided by Hoover that communists were trying to infiltrate King's movement. That was a fact.

Q: But did you write that memo?

A: Here's the thing. I'd like to see it. It says "Moyers and Jenkins"? I'd like to get that from FOIA [the Freedom of Information Act] because I don't remember it.

Q: Did you disseminate the information

Hoover provided about King's sex life in order to discredit King?

A: I was a very flawed young man, with more energy than wisdom. But I have never in my life engaged in character assassination. Never in my life. And never, never, never did I disseminate any of Hoover's information to journalists regarding King. I have said this under oath to the Judiciary Committee. I never, and to my knowledge, no one in the White House ever made public the information that Hoover sent us about King. I did circulate to the National Security Council, and only to the National Security Council, at Johnson's request, information that Hoover was alleging about communist infiltration of King's entourage. LBJ wanted them to know that King was vulnerable to being exploited by people eager to discredit the civil rights movement by discrediting him. None of this material was ever leaked by the NSC or anyone else at the White House.

Johnson never treated King as if that information was at all significant. He responded to King on the moral issue, not regarding the promiscuous allegations Hoover was spreading around.

Q: The Garrow book also alleges that during the 1964 Democratic convention, "DeLoach kept in almost continuous telephone contact with White House aides Bill

Moyers and [Walter] Jenkins," discussing the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party challenge to the party regulars. According to this account, you and Jenkins used this information to "greatly erode the MFDP's support inside the crucial credentials committee." So according to the FBI, they were bugging King's hotel room, giving you the information, and you and Jenkins used it to achieve a victory for the anti-civil rights forces there. Is any of that true? Were you using Hoover's wiretaps to screw the civil rights people there?

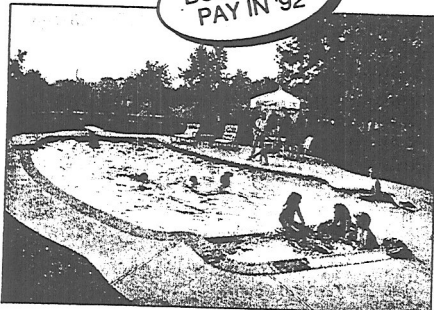
A: I don't think so. My memory of those events is not precise. For me to really answer that, I have to involve a man who is not around to defend himself. Johnson put me in charge of the convention. Hoover had told LBJ of threats to disrupt the convention with violence, and the president in turn asked Hoover to keep us informed of where those threats might erupt. They never materialized. I didn't know there were wiretaps placed in King's hotel. And I do not believe the FBI put a wiretap in King's room at any time on the instructions of anyone in the White House.

Johnson did not need Hoover to tell him that he was—as he said to Hubert Humphrey—"walking a goddam tight-rope" between the Dixiecrats who wanted

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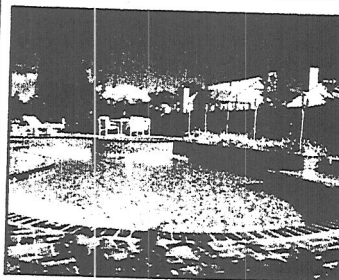
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another walkout, threatening the president in his Southern base, and the civil rights movement he was determined to encourage. He feared Hoover would run to his right-wing friends with ammunition that the president wasn't taking his warnings seriously about "communist" infiltration of King and the movement. We were doing our best to keep on good terms with the FBI. Dealing with J. Edgar Hoover was a complex and tricky process and we never knew what would happen with him.

Were we temporizing? Yes. Were we frightened of J. Edgar Hoover like Kennedy was? Like Nixon was? Absolutely. We were scared to death of him. Just like Nixon said in those tapes: "Hoover could bring us all down." Johnson felt that way. Johnson didn't know what Hoover could have printed about him. He didn't. But did we ever do in Martin Luther King as a result of this information? Not at all. We received him in the White House. We honored him. We made compromises, absolutely. We wanted to hold the South against Goldwater. But not at the price of ruining King or destroying the civil rights movement.

Look, whose side ultimately prevailed and on whose side were we? J. Edgar Hoover or Martin Luther King's? Who won? Martin won in 1965. We won the

civil rights battles of the '60s. We lost the political war. The Democratic Party of my youth was the party of "nigger, nigger, nigger." We cost the Democratic Party the opportunity to demagogue the issue of race forever. And I am damn proud of that.

Q: Another allegation involves DeLoach's claim that after Walter Jenkins was arrested in a public bathroom stall for "disorderly conduct," you called DeLoach on Johnson's orders and told him to investigate the sex lives of Goldwater's staff. Any truth to that one?

A: I wrote a column in Newsweek about this in 1975. The question had nothing to do with the sexual histories of Goldwater's staff. Hoover told the president that Walter's entrapment may have been engineered by employees of the Republican National Committee formerly tied to Goldwater. It had not been the police that tipped off the press about Walter's arrest. Johnson told me to call DeLoach and tell him that if he wanted to keep his nice house and soft job, "his boys had better find those bastards who had done this to Walter." I did call DeLoach—and then forgot about it. Once again, nothing that the FBI reported to the White House on that matter was ever leaked or used in any way to embarrass Goldwater. By the way, all these years later, I still don't

know anything about the sexual histories of Goldwater's staff.

Q: A great many people also wonder why, when you finally left the Johnson administration in 1967, you did so politely and quietly, rather than denouncing Johnson's Vietnam policies, which you privately considered to be disastrous. You had no compunction about making a big stink when you left CBS.

A: I thought I could change CBS. I had given up trying to change Lyndon Johnson. The question is, do you grow wiser because of your scars or do you grow wiser in spite of your scars? I quit for many more reasons than just Vietnam. I was exhausted. I had become marginal. The things I really cared about—poverty, the Great Society, civil rights—were all being drained away by the war. I was a symbol but not a force. Plus I had commanding personal commitments.

The line that keeps running through my mind is the line I never spoke: "I can't speak for a war that I believe is immoral." Johnson told me he wanted peace, and a part of me wanted to believe him. I was young, uncertain, struggling, compromised as we all are compromised as young men. If I thought by speaking out, I could have changed anything, I think I would have spoken out. I don't know.

Q: A second, rather glaring irony involved

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ture that there is no real political culture left. The defining exchange is money, not ideas, not problem-solving. We live in a democracy of money and images. Politicians who can manipulate images can divert the people from the money that is changing hands. So you can go to a flag factory in New Jersey and make people feel patriotic without telling them that you are selling the land beneath it to the Japanese.

Q: Isn't there supposed to be an opposition party in this country that is charged with keeping the other guys honest?

A: I asked a friend the other day, "What's your reaction to Bob Strauss's appointment?" His answer was, "Buy stock in Bob Strauss's firm." That is what has happened to our democracy and to our Democratic Party.

The problem with the Democratic Party is that it is not willing to lose on the basis of its convictions. It's losing instead by buying into the public lie of the moment. It is part of Washington's mercenary culture.

The measure of success in politics is decided in Washington now, and the measure of success is in being a good lawyer, a good lobbyist. I like Bob Strauss for the convivial man he is. And Clark Clifford is an old friend for whom I have genuine affection. But they embody what has happened to the Democratic Party. It has been taken over by the money-changers.

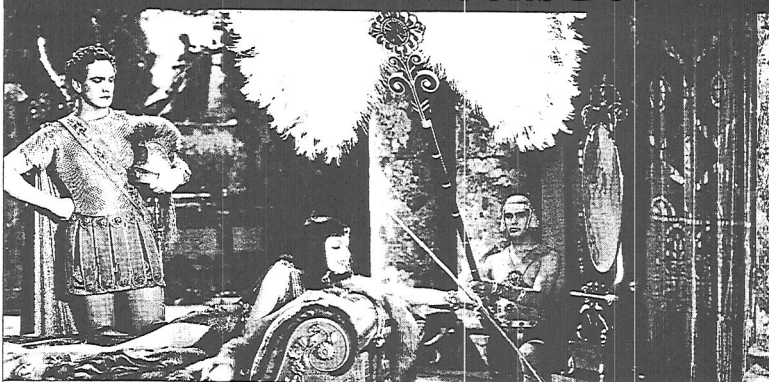
When the New York Times described Strauss as the "ultimate capitalist," following his appointment, I laughed out loud. If Strauss is the ultimate capitalist, then Bonnie and Clyde were the ultimate bankers. He does not create wealth but lives off the wealth of others. That is what kind of capitalism is produced by Washington's mercenary culture.

Q: And so Washington—this nexus of money, conflicting interest and media manipulation—has replaced what once was a two-party system and a genuine democracy?

A: It's not just that it has replaced the vote of the people. The pure vote of the people was never meant to be the final arbiter. Representative government presupposes that those we send to represent us will exercise their best judgment on behalf of the country, including our moral compact with posterity. That isn't working any longer because of the complex thicket of self-interest at work. Posterity becomes the next election. Washington has become the equivalent of BCCI. In the political culture in Washington, there is a bank and then there is a secret bank inside that one and another secret bank inside that one. Accountability has disappeared.

I was with a group of construction workers recently who were bemoaning their diminished standard of living be-

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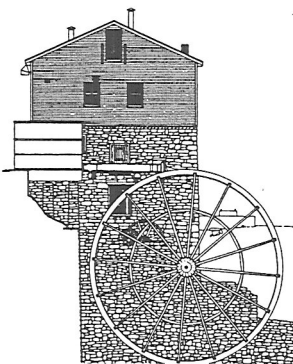
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tween 1980 and now. "How many of you voted for Reagan?" I asked. Every one raised his hand. They were betrayed.

Q: Could these entanglements be disentangled if the American people got sufficiently fed up, or do we need some kind of procedural revolution to restore democracy to our government?

A: We need some kind of procedural revolution, and I think that requires some kind of grass-roots renewal of democratic participation. Once people participate they begin to feel like moral agents again. They come to think they matter again. I don't have an answer for this, but I hope we can use television somehow to begin to reengage people in this conversation of democracy.

Q: But as Adweek columnist Barbara Lipert observed on one of your specials: "As people get more used to watching television and live their lives filtered through the TV screen, they get more passive about everything. They're not involved in the political process the way they would have been, maybe 30 or 40 years ago when the only way they could have gotten information was by reading newspapers, by asking questions, by doing some investigation. And instead, they'll see these TV commercials and make a decision on emotion." How can you expect to inspire people to become active democratic agents when you appear on a medium which inspires nothing so much as passivity?

A: It's a long slow process beginning with education on how to think critically about what you see on television. I think we need to teach media literacy in our schools. Second, it will require political leadership to connect people who are already out there, fighting outside of Washington. If you travel the country as I do, you will be astonished by the vigor of local action—people saving Barton Creek in Austin, fighting the real estate interests for Walden Pond, the national toxics campaign. The national parties no longer have it, but it is there almost everywhere at the local level. But it will take political leadership, coalition-building and information-sharing to help these people realize that they are not alone. And it isn't going to happen from within one of the two parties. It is going to take a new political party in my judgment, a kind of party where a Jack Kemp and a Bill Moyers will feel at home. I don't know Kemp, but I think he is the best representative of what conservatives in this country were supposed to be about—the party of ideas, the party of caring, the party of trying to do something for people.

Q: So are you interested in running for president as the leader of this new party?

A: I'm not being asked. There are letters, there are columns, there are promptings, but I don't think of myself in this regard. I

perceive of myself as a journalist. And I am modest enough not to be seduced by other people's desperation. Yet.

Q: Do you care to expand on that word "yet"?

A: No.

Q: Well, let's get back to the larger problem then. Did the sight of people coming together during the Persian Gulf War give you any sense of hope about our ability to solve our problems?

A: You know, I stood and watched the people watching the parade in New York. A lot of them were working-class people, people who probably don't have a whole lot to rejoice about in the America of the '80s and '90s, and there was a joy in their celebration. There was a triumph in their faces. And I thought what a shame it was that it takes that kind of experience to make people feel good about their country. They were so desperate for a victory, for some evidence that the system could work, that public policy could create something of value, that they were celebrating and they weren't sure why. They deserve to celebrate too, but it's a shame they can't celebrate the building of better schools or a victory over homelessness.

The good news is that people are finding that fulfillment in their own interior lives. This is behind the whole effort to redefine what it means to be spiritual in America today. The power of Joseph Campbell [the Sarah Lawrence professor of mythology who became famous when Moyers made him the subject of a six-hour PBS special] was to give a vocabulary to someone's search for healing within oneself. The bad news is if that becomes a substitute for public policies that change the character of our society, it will be a schizophrenic existence we continue to live.

Q: Can a public renewal take place in the absence of a major catastrophe?

A: We are by nature a very conservative country. It took us almost two centuries to expunge slavery from our society. It took almost that long to give women the vote. Pearl Harbor brought us into World War II. It took a depression to convince us that our economy was out of kilter. Let me give you a smaller parable. The United States didn't really want to keep Clark Air Base in the Philippines. But we got ourselves entangled in the Philippines to the point that we needed it for political reasons rather than military reasons. It took a volcano—an upheaval of nature—to convince Dick Cheney to do what he probably wanted to do in the first place, which was close Clark Air Base. In that sense, history is a good instructor about how tardy Americans can be in doing the right thing.

But there is a moral ground underneath the swamp of ruthless competition and

avarice. America is a place where, when you don't live up to the ideal, it's a disappointment. The French and British couldn't imagine why Watergate stirred so much fuss here. The Israelis and Swiss think Iran-contra was a joke. But Americans know we can and should do better. It takes a long time, but women do get the vote, slavery does get abolished. People do put their jobs, education and careers on the line to end the Vietnam War. Lyndon Johnson used to say to Martin Luther King: "Give me a reason to do the right thing. Keep the pressure on. Keep marching. Keep fighting." That is a sad but honest reflection of how social change takes place. If we have to wait for a catastrophe, however, the people we are hurting in the process will take little consolation in our excuses. The next generation cannot hold us accountable. Ronald Reagan will be up on Mount Rushmore and George Bush will be carved into the stadium at Texas A&M before the next generation wakes up and says, "Who did this to us? Who stole our standard of living?"

Q: What happened to the spirit that built this country into the most prosperous nation in the history of mankind?

A: What has changed, with dreadful consequences, is that we don't acknowledge that we have failed, failing ourselves but especially our children. When I read back through the letters and speeches and documents of the founding era, I'm always impressed at how often you find references to "ourselves and our Posterity." The future was to them part of the moral compact. But we're creating a future of diminished expectations. The "City on a Hill" is sinking beneath our feet, but we're editing the ground out of the shot. And it's not just our political leaders. Reagan is no more responsible for everything liberals accuse him of than liberal welfare programs have created the mess the right loves to deplore. It's no longer fashionable to do the right thing, now or in the long run. So we read of a 14-year-old with AIDS who plans to get married and both sets of parents are encouraging them. [The moral philosopher Reinhold] Niebuhr was right: The art of politics consists of directing rationally the irrationalities of men. But when neither people nor leaders are willing to face reality, look out, brother—you're living a lie, and nations can die of too many lies.

Yes, Lyndon Johnson was an SOB. Lyndon Johnson got rich in Washington. This stuff isn't new, it's just been democratized. But Johnson did have a vision of the future. Even [biographer Robert] Caro will admit that. Kennedy, for all his personal flaws, had a vision of the future. I never heard of girlfriends—of Marilyn Monroe and the Mafia and Judith Exner—until later, but I was there when

he said, "Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country." And he brought out the best in me. I've never forgotten the experience of hearing that summons. We don't talk that way anymore.

This sounds like rhetoric and I suppose it is, but we are creating a society that is unfit for children. That is a recent development in American life.

Q: But The Washington Post is filled with stories about politicians claiming to be on the side of children.

A: But we cannot hope to really help the children simply by passing another law or creating another program. The way you really help children is to invest in an economy that grows, in highways and mass transit—to create a society that puts its financial house in order, that saves, that defers gratification. Helping children is a moral act, not a legislative act. If liberals have learned anything in the past 40 years, it is that the answer is not always just another law. Some of the governors have begun to realize this and try to work around Washington to achieve solutions to these problems. But that is the only way these issues will be addressed: if Washington is disregarded.

Q: You seem to be describing two problems which, in tandem, would appear to be insurmountable. On the one hand we have spirited local efforts at responsible self-government but nothing to connect them. On the other we have a national political culture controlled by money and image manipulation that prevents this kind of communication from taking place. Who is going to break that logjam?

A: I think if I could figure that one out I might really be seduced. The frame just freezes there. If I knew how to move beyond analysis and criticism into change and reform, I'd feel a responsibility to get out there and fight for it. After all, this is a perilous situation. Not for us; we are protected. But around the corner there is a slow painful reckoning in the offing.

The single greatest loss in my time has been the idea that we are moral agents. Religion helped a great deal here. Religion taught that we are accountable for our own actions. Tribute is still paid to it today, but all that we have been talking about indicates that nobody really expects it anymore. One thing you can say about Lyndon Johnson is that he finally paid the price for his excesses. I don't think you can say that about anyone in American politics today. ■

Eric Alterman is the author of Sound and Fury: Washington Pundits and the Collapse of American Politics, which will be published next year by HarperCollins. His last article for the Magazine was a profile of John McLaughlin.

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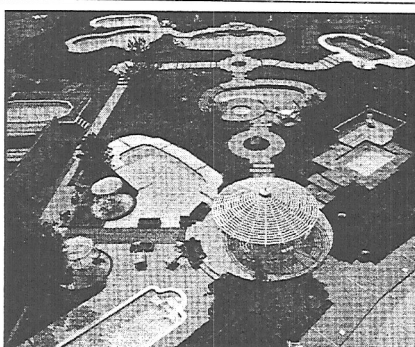
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